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ABSTRACT

Federal statistics reveal that 59.5 million Americans live outside urban areas, and the public school students who live in these rural areas constitute the largest minority public school population in this country; however, the lion's share of attention, research, and federal and state financial support goes to large schools in metropolitan areas. Rural educators must make certain that rural students begin to receive their fair share of attention and resources. In the current concern for the improvement of public education, those who work in rural and small schools must make certain that legislative decisionmakers are informed of the unique qualities and associated strengths and weaknesses of rural schools. In any statewide effort to improve education, rural schools must be represented on task forces and study groups to insure that mandatory guidelines and requirements acknowledge and allow for differences between large big-city school districts and small rural ones. The need to persuade legislators and educational decisionmakers to consider rural education points out the need for more and better rural schools research so that recommendations to policymakers can be based on facts. Areas in need of study include rural school effectiveness, staff development, and the use of educational technologies. (JHZ)

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HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW ABOUT RURAL EDUCATION? WHAT DO WE NEED TO FIND OUT?

Keynote Address Delivered at the
Minnesota Rural Education Association
Second Annual Conference
April 9-10, 1986
Mankato, Minnesota

by

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HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW ABOUT RURAL SCHOOLS?

WHAT DO WE NEED TO FIND OUT?

Feeling Proud to be a Rural Educator

I want you to know that I am deeply honored, and indeed thrilled to be here. I am grateful for this opportunity to participate in a discussion on rural education. I'm told that my assignment is to speak to you and that yours is to listen. If you finish before I do, I hope you'll let me know. My remarks this morning will be about 30 minutes.

Coming from the arid plains of West Texas, I must admit that it is exciting to be in the land of ten thousand lakes. Minnesota is a state with a rich rural heritage. My own roots originate in the Mountain West, and are rural. Although many years have passed, it doesn't seem that long ago that I was stooped beneath 20 Holstein dairy cows each night and morning perfecting my skill in extracting milk. While still very young, I had expressed to my father an interest in learning to milk the cows. My tasks had previously been to "round them up" from the pasture prior to milking then to feed them afterwards. My father was eager to comply with my request to move up the career ladder and learn the art of milking. Soon -- in addition to my other chores -- I was also milking the cows. It was then that I realized milking cows wasn't as rewarding as I thought it would be. I spoke to my dad and told him, "I don't like to milk the cows." He responded understandingly: "That's okay. You don't have to like it." I continued to milk cows until graduation from high

school.

I'm proud of my rural background and most grateful for it. My rural roots bring back memories of a world where I personally knew most of the people in our small Utah farming community and was known by them. It was a typical rural community where people worked hard, yet also were able to relax and enjoy life -- fresh air, home cooked meals, neighborhood gatherings, church socials, and close family ties. I remember there was always a deep respect, even a reverence, for the land. Smelling the aroma of fresh mown hay, swimming in the canal, walking through a field of golden brown wheat, and catching catfish in the river are experiences which will never be forgotten. On the other hand, thinning sugar beets, cleaning the pig pens, or shearing the sheep -- these activities resurrect memories of a different nature.

Growing up rural was a rich experience. I'm so glad it was a part of my experience. And now it is rewarding for me, and I believe appropriately so, to be involved in rural education. For like so many of you, I'm a product of rural America and America's rural schools.

For the past two years our family has lived in Texas. Texans are fiercely proud of their heritage and history. This year is the Texas Sequisentennial -- 150 years since Texas gained independence from Mexico. Upon moving from Utah to Texas, many of our neighbors and new friends were quick to inform us that they were native Texans. With the only car on the block with a Utah license plate, I began to feel very uncomfortable. Shortly after moving, I was talking to a neighbor and unthinkingly asked if he had heard the story of the Texan who had died and gone to his

eternal home. After several days in his new environment, the Texan approached the Gate Keeper and said, "I'm so happy. I had no idea that Heaven could be so much like Texas." The Gate Keeper looked at him somewhat sadly and replied, "Son, I'm so sorry. This is not Heaven." My neighbor didn't laugh. The next week I went to the county assessor and paid for my Texas license plates. In addition, I got a bumper sticker that read, "Native Texan." My wife was born in San Antonio, and even though her parents moved to California when she was only two months old, since our move to Texas I've often heard her mention to others that she's a native.

Last month I was in San Antonio for the first time. After attending my meetings, I went to visit the Alamo before going to the airport. There, at the Alamo, I began to sense the pride that is so common to Texans. At the entrance to the Alamo there is a sign on the door that reads something to the effect "Friend, speak with reverence inside these walls, for it is here that heroes fell." For me that was a humbling experience. After two hours I walked out of the Alamo with a feeling of intense pride that I too am now a Texan. The point I wish to make is this. Those of us who work and teach in rural schools should be equally proud. We share a common interest and a rich heritage

Contributions of Rural Schools in the Past?

Well into this century, America's public education system was dominated by rural schools. In an age before calculators, microcomputers, television, and rapid transit, hundreds of thousands of children learned their arithmetic, civics, geography, and other lessons in the small rural school of the past. In most

cases, students learned independently and progressed at their own rate. In these schools, it was not unusual that only two or three students attended the same grade. While older pupils helped the younger ones, the teacher was able to take time to individualize lessons and provide personal contact with each student on a daily basis. Younger pupils became fully aware of what was expected of them in the next grade because they could see and hear older children working on advanced lessons. The education received in these schools did have value, and perhaps that is why the small rural school of the past is so often looked upon with nostalgia.

It would be interesting, perhaps astounding, to be able to identify the number of successful professionals in business, education, science, and other disciplines who received their public education in a small school. Many of you attending this meeting are testimony that rural schools have produced successful graduates. The small country school of yesteryear was the impetus from which many of today's better known educational "innovations" originated. Notions such as non-graded classrooms, individualized instruction, low student/teacher ratios, cross-age grouping, peer tutoring, using the community as a resource, "mainstreaming" mildly handicapped pupils, and emphasizing the basics -- to name just a few -- all have their roots in the small school of the past.

Rural Schools today

Federal statistics reveal that 59.5 million Americans live outside designated urban areas of the United States. That is, they reside in the open countryside or in communities of less than

2500 people. Public school students who live in these rural areas constitute the largest minority public school population in this country (Sher, 1977; Treadway, 1984). Based on the U.S. Census Bureau's definition of "rural," nearly two-thirds of the 15,600 public school districts located in the United States are in rural areas and one student in every three attends an elementary or secondary school classified as rural (REA News, 1982). Furthermore, nearly one-third of all public school teachers in the United States serve predominately rural constituencies (Massey and Crosby, 1983). Ironically, however, the "lion's share" of attention, research, and an over balance of federal and state financial support generally go to large schools in metropolitan areas. To a degree this is understandable for the larger districts do enroll the majority of students. Even in Minnesota, almost 70 percent of the public school studentbody are enrolled in less than 20 percent of the districts. This is a pattern that is common through our nation. I do not criticize this fact but do raise concern about the 30 percent who do not attend big city or metropolitan schools. What can we do, what must we do to make certain these students receive their fair share of attention and resources?

Not until 1983, four years after the establishment of the U.S. Department of Education, did that federal department declare a "Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 1980's" which stated, "Rural Education shall receive an equitable share of the information, services, assistance and funds from and through the Department of Education and its programs (ERIC CRESS, 1983/84)." In 1983, the National Center for Education Statistics

also agreed, for the first time, to include small and rural schools of under 300 students (fully one-fourth of all public school districts in this country) as a separate category for data collection (REA News, 1983).

Many would argue that the basics of instruction are the same for urban, suburban, and rural schools. There is truth in this statement. Yet, there are also important demands of the rural instructional settings which are different. For example, rural teachers are generally more isolated from ongoing developments in their field. Secondary teachers typically teach a wider range of courses than their metropolitan counterparts and are expected to take on added extra curricular assignments, often without compensation. Elementary teachers are likely to teach two or more grade levels in the same classroom. Rural teachers are apt to receive limited or sporadic inservice training. Budgets are often much lower per capita than those for most urban and suburban schools. It is not unusual for materials and supplies to be either outdated or inadequate. And, teachers' salaries are about 20 percent below the level for metropolitan teachers (Barker, 1985; Barker and Beckner, 1985).

Those of us who work in rural education know that one of the most striking characteristics of rural and small schools is their diversity. Some are experiencing growth, others decline, while still others remain stable. A few have large amounts of monies for their average daily attendance, many have little. Some are situated in sparse areas, geographically isolated while others are geographically quite close together. As in other states, this demographic diversity is very evident in Minnesota. In Minnesota,

the median district has a student enrollment of 645 students. This figure is somewhat deceptive, however, for only two percent of the state's districts (large districts with over 10,000 pupils) enroll fully 28 percent of the state's students; whereas, on the other end of the spectrum, 20 percent of the districts (small districts with fewer than 300 students) enroll only three percent of the state's studentbody (The Condition of Education, 1985).

Not withstanding the diversity common to rural schools, most share several dominant characteristics. These include a slower paced, less pressured environment; a greater spirit of cooperation among students and staff; more opportunities for student leadership and involvement; and more formal interaction among students, staff, and parents (Sher, 1977). As a result, numerous advantages of small rural schools have been cited (Barker, 1986):

- Students are at the center of the school.
- Discipline is usually not a serious problem, thereby resulting in increased time-on-task.
- Teachers still have a sense of control over what and how they teach.
- A minimum of bureaucracy allows for more flexibility in decision making.
- Low pupil-teacher ratios allow for individualized instruction and more attention given to students.
- Relationship between students, teachers, administrators, and school board members, tend to be closer.
- Parental and community involvement tends to be stronger than in larger schools.

The Bandwagon of Educational Reform

In the past three years, America has witnessed a virtual explosion of reports on the status of public education in our

country and accompanying recommendations on how to improve it. Few of the national reports or studies even mention the words "rural education." If it is to be addressed at all, it will have to be at the state or local level. To date over 275 state-level task forces have been assigned to study educational improvement across the 50 states (The Nation Responds, 1984). Within three years it seems as though we have gone from "A Nation at Risk" to "Fifty Separate States at Risk." In Minnesota, eight task forces or study groups have been formed to study issues related to educational improvement. Already, the State Board of Education has increased the number of courses that districts must offer secondary students and the Commissioner of Education has recommended "learner outcomes." As you well know, other efforts are also under consideration -- increased graduation requirements, student testing, stiffer college admission's requirements, etc.

Most would agree that legislation, rules, and regulations have been with the best intentions to contribute toward the excellence in education movement underway in our country. Nevertheless, results of educational reform will fall indiscriminately upon school districts. Some mandates will cause compliance problems for many small rural districts. In any statewide effort to improve education, we must voice the need for rural school representation on task forces and study groups. Those of us who work in rural and small schools must make certain that legislative decision makers are informed of the unique qualities and associated strengths and weaknesses of rural schools. For legislative policy and decision makers to place

mandatory guidelines and requirements upon the schools without acknowledging and allowing for differences between large big city school districts and small rural ones would be a mistake. To avoid either misguided or uniformed action against rural schools, we have a responsibility to (1) seek input from rural groups all across the state who represent the varied rural constituency; (2) assist in the creation, development, and support of rural interest groups throughout the state; (3) develop leadership at both the local and state level; and (4) organize efforts to inform legislators and state educational leaders on the role of rural schools in the state and make recommendations on how excellence in these schools can best be achieved. Certainly, those who are the closest to rural schools should have a strong voice in how such schools are to be improved.

The Need for Research in Rural Schools

Never before in the history of education has there been focused greater attention on the improvement of education. The "excellence" movement is one that will definitely carry forward into the next decade. In our efforts to assure that rural education is properly represented in any actions taken to improve education, those of us who support rural schools find ourselves in a quandary. With release of the Department of Education's "Rural Education and Rural Family Education Policy for the 1980's," rural education has received increased attention at the national level. Several states including Minnesota, Utah, Texas, Oklahoma, Iowa, Colorado, Michigan and others have also organized to support quality rural schools. Rural schools are receiving increased

attention throughout our nation. The problem, however, is that we have a limited and largely non-additive research base from which to support many of the claims we often make of the values and benefits of small schools (Stephens, 1985). The story has been told of the high school football player who was interviewing with the head coach at the State University for a position on the team. "Tell me son," asked the coach, "what are your strengths?"

"I pass an average of 67 yards, run a 100 yard dash on a muddy field in 9.7 seconds, and punt an average of 73 yards."

"Those statistics sound excellent and we need someone with those skills on our team. Now we also like to ask people some of their weaknesses."

The young man thought for a moment then said, "I tend to exaggerate."

Small and rural school proponents have often spoken of the many advantages associated with smallness. I frequently speak of them myself. In our efforts to promote rural schools, we should be careful not to become carried away to the point that we make exaggerated claims that cannot be supported either with sound reasoning or solid research. We talk about increased opportunities for individualized attention resulting from low student/teacher ratios, increased time-on-task because of fewer bureaucratic or disciplinary interruptions, and so on. But where is the empirical research to show that rural students benefit from these self-proclaimed advantages, or that we educators capitalize on them?

The research base is growing, yet we are still extremely limited in what we actually know about rural education. The state

of rural schools research is both incomplete and inadequate. The chasm between what we know and what we need to find out is both wide and deep. Wide because of limited coverage and deep because of lack of analysis. This is not to say that good research has not been conducted. Only that there is too little of it. In comparison to the study of education in an urban setting, the topic of rural education seems almost untouched. If we are to positively influence legislators and educational decision makers to include rural education in matters affecting change and improvement then the recommendations we provide them must be based on facts. Policy makers are typically individuals who want to make correct decisions. Of necessity, they usually seek input and advice. Emotional arguments or biased claims are no substitute for correct and accurate information.

The "effective schools" movement, for example, has received considerable attention in the past few years. What do we know about effective rural schools? How are they organized? How do they operate? What characteristics do they share with effective urban schools? Recent research on effective schools recognizes the value of strong community support, manageable school size, close interpersonal relationships between students and teachers, and creative leadership. Most of us would agree that these qualities have traditionally been inherent in rural education. To be able to support this claim with solid research, however, would provide legislators and educational decision makers with hard data that could be used to promote the cause of rural and small schools.

In 1985 two separate efforts were made to compile and

prioritize research needs in rural education. Researchers at the National Rural Development Institute at Western Washington University (Helge, et. al., 1985) emphasized the need for data on rural school effectiveness, financial issues affecting rural schools, the use of advanced technologies for both administrative and instructional purposes, as well as other issues important to rural education. A related study conducted by the Rural Education Association also expressed the need for data on effective rural schools, and placed emphasis for studies on staff development, and the demography and taxonomy of rural education, etc. (Barker and Stephens, 1985). Both studies collaborate each other and clearly indicate that rural education is a topic which beckons inquiry and investigation. Among just a few of the specific areas we need to investigate include (Barker and Stephens, 1985):

- Demographic make-up of students who attend rural schools.
- Student achievement in rural schools
- Characteristics of effective rural schools.
- Successful instructional programs that can be replicated.
- Strategies for the recruitment and retention of qualified personnel.
- The use of advanced interactive instructional technologies.
- Impact of educational reform on rural schools.
- Politics of school finance in rural communities.
- Effects of consolidation on rural schools, students, and communities.
- Importance of the school to the economy, etc. of a small rural community.
- Role of the school as a mechanism to promote rural development.
- Alternatives to school district consolidation.

- Strategies to increase awareness of rural education within state offices of education.

To these topics, I could add many, many more. There is so much we have yet to learn about rural schools -- so much that we have yet to find out. The dearth of empirical studies is so broad as to beg participation in the research process from university based researchers, research units within government agencies, research groups within professional organizations, and above all research initiated by practitioners at the local school level. A review of the many and varied topics for this conference is definitely indicative that Minnesota is serious about rural school improvement. Let us make every effort to see that successful practices and programs are shared and replicated wherever possible, that new knowledge is written down and disseminated appropriately where it will be of most benefit.

Conclusion

To be involved in rural education is demanding, exciting, challenging, and rewarding all in one. I believe that the following description of a teacher's duty which appeared in a 1917 bulletin issued to teachers in Texas' one-room schools still has meaning to educators who work in rural schools today (Stoltzfus, 1917):

> There is probably no occupation of normal life more exhaustive of both physical and mental strength than is teaching. The teacher's work does not begin nor end with the legally stated hours; but after the school has dismissed for the day, there are conferences to hold, new lessons to be put on the board, rooms to be put in order for the next day; the condition of outbuildings, of the water and fuel supply to be investigated; and the preparation of illustrative material for the next day's

> lessons to be made. Each day adds to these its own problems. It is necessary, therefore, that the teacher be given an attractive, comfortable, convenient room in which to live, and in which he can recuperate his energies for the next day's work. A tempting, well-balanced meal should await this faithful public servant at the end of his day's work. An hour of recreation and rest should follow this pleasant meal, after which, as every true teacher knows, more hours of hard work begin. He must spend some time in thinking over the past day's work, in planning better methods of management in the schoolroom and on the school ground. The class written exercises must be corrected. Each pupil's paper requires careful study and criticism. Each lesson for the next day must be carefully planned, and the best method of presenting it thought out. It may be necessary to introduce a new song or game for which preparation must also be made before this tired teacher can rest for the night.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to meet and visit with you. My wish for each of you is that you rest soundly and sleep well when you retire to bed tonight.

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